

## “THE SHEPHERD’S LOT”

A Short Story By

Nick Gallup

Smoking was allowed at USM in those days, 1959, to be exact, except that you couldn't smoke in the class room. There was a 10-minute break between periods, and that was when I'd head out into the hall to have a smoke. Smoking was cool in those days, and I didn't know hardly anyone who didn't indulge. I had back-to-back Lit classes, and I'd rushed out of the first class to have a much-needed cigarette. I'd just caught hell from Dr. Young.

Not that I didn't deserve it. Dr. Young just got to me. He was so damned smug. Okay, I expected smug if it came to something involving Lit, but I hoped for at least a little objectivity. But he worshipped William Faulkner. Faulkner, although he wrote in Mississippi Greek, was, in Dr. Young's opinion, the greatest writer who ever lived, solely because, or so I theorized, he hailed from Mississippi. What other reason could there be? It certainly wasn't the life-lessons conveyed in his writing. He wrote in Mississippi Greek, and no one understood what the hell he was writing about.

Anyway, Dr. Young had given us a list of books to read. We were supposed to choose one and then present a verbal book report to the class and him. Verbal book reports were fine, but he had a puzzling stipulation. We had to repeat the title of the book and its author three times during our presentation. Three times? Why three? Two wouldn't suffice? If three were better, why not five or ten?

The list of ten books we could report on contained nearly every novel

Faulkner had written, including his dreaded “The Sound and the Fury.” Try reading that book sometimes. It’s written from the points of view of four people, one of whom is a 40-year old man with the IQ of a 10-year old and attention deficit disorder - my diagnosis anyway. He’ll be telling what happened and something he says reminds him of something that happened 20 years before, and he’s off to the races with a totally different story. Your only clue to this is that his ramblings are emphasized by being in Italics. Big help. Oh, and if you chose one of the Faulkner novels to report on, you had a pretty good shot at scoring an A. Anyone else, especially Hemingway, and you’d be lucky to emerge with a C.

The week before we’d covered For “Whom the Bell Tolls.” Dr. Young bad-mouthed it all week, ending his trashing of it with the comment that “The only good thing Hemingway wrote in the novel was the title.” Hemingway wrote the title? Come on, Dr. Young. I had to intercede. I raised my hand.

After ignoring me for a full five minutes, he finally bade me speak.

“Are you saying, sir, that he actually devised the title himself?”

“I am.”

“He wasn’t quoting someone else?”

“No, but as I say, it was one of the better things he wrote.”

“I beg to differ, sir. The title was plagiarized from an essay by John Donne, wherein he wrote ‘Each man’s death diminishes me, for I am a part of all mankind. So, do not send to ask for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.’”

He looked at me as if I had just burned down his barn, which happens on

every other page in a Faulkner novel. “I know of no John Donne essay containing that quote. I recommend you reread your John Donne.”

No, I said to myself. You’d better read your John Donne. He was wrong, and I sensed that he knew it, and, even worse, he knew I knew he knew it.

Strike one. Strike two had just occurred when it befell to me to deliver my verbal book report. We had a distinguished student in our class, one Constance Lynn Parsons, the reigning Miss Mississippi. She was beyond beautiful, tall, slim, honey blonde hair, huge, long-lashed brown eyes, and a smile so dazzling it could be used as a weapon to bring you to your knees. She’d preceded me on stage presenting her book report, and, although she’d had the good sense to select a Faulkner novel, had mentioned the book’s author and title but twice.

“What can’t students follow simple guidance,” Dr. Young moaned to the heavens. “Am I being unreasonable? What is so hard about mentioning the title three times?”

Stupid me. I’d naively thought the purpose of a book report was to say enough about it to prove you’d actually read it, and two, to impart some of what you had learned to your classmates - not to practice Gregorian chants.

“Okay, Rutherford,” he said reluctantly, “your turn to dazzle us.”

Rutherford was my real name, but I’d made it clear to everyone who would listen that I detested the name and preferred to be addressed by the less pretentious name of Ford. I’d been debating whether to do it or not, but Dr. Young’s use of my full Christian name against my wishes had convinced me that the stupid thing I was about to do was not the stupidest thing I could do.

I strolled to the front of the class and began my folly. “My book report today is ‘The Sun Also Rises’ by Ernest Hemingway, ‘The Sun Also Rises’ by Ernest Hemingway, ‘The Sun Also Rises’ by Ernest Hemingway.’ It’s a book about a man who is severely wounded---”

“Enough! Enough!” Dr. Young thundered. “Return to your seat.” His tone and angry demeanor pretty much convinced me I didn’t need to send anyone to ask for whom the bell was tolling. Thus, my need for a cigarette.

So, there I was in the hall shaking out a cigarette when I heard the voice of an angel behind me, a southern angel I might add. “Fa-ya-ord, ma-yah-ah haa-uv won-un of-a you-a-or cig-er-a-re-etts?” The angel inquired. Not to worry, I’ll translate southern dialect for you by default from here on.

I turned and was lasered by the beautiful smile of Miss Mississippi.

I hastily shook out a cigarette for her. She waited for a light. I found my matches and with trembling hands lit it for her. She inhaled and blew ambrosia my way. Although I’d never smelled ambrosia and hadn’t a clue what it smelled like, I chose to believe it was ambrosia and sucked up all the air within six feet of me.

“That was so funny what you did,” she laughed. “So, how long have you had this urge for self-immolation?”

“It’s a Biloxi thing,” I said. “Too much salt air.”

“I thought I detected Cajun in your voice. I like it, though. Sexy. Sounds a little French.”

“I like your accent, too,” I fibbed.

She gave me a naughty boy look. “You know it’s nothing but southern syrup.” She sighed and blew more ambrosia my way. “I’m afraid it’s going to hurt me, though, in the Miss America competition. I almost wish I’d never gotten into it.”

“Why? Is there an accent competition?” I inquired, as I gave her a full body scan. She was dressed in a navy skirt and a light blue blouse. She wore her thick mane of honey blonde hair in a ponytail.

She smiled indulgently. “No, but there’s a talent competition.”

“What’s your talent, other than being beautiful, I mean?”

She waved my compliment off. It was probably the millionth time she’d heard it. “Dramatic readings?” She phrased it as more of a question than an answer.

I almost choked at that. Dramatic readings with her accent? Nonetheless I politely asked, “What are you going to read?”

She shook her wide, slim Ava Garner shoulders. “I haven’t decided yet. My coach says I should do some Shakespeare. He thinks it’ll impress the judges more. Any suggestions?”

I’d relaxed a bit since we’d been talking. I’d grown less inhibited, and, to my immense surprise, I did have some suggestions - and they all had to do with her accent.

My first thought was that I hoped she wasn’t paying her coach cash money to make insane suggestions like reading Shakespeare with a southern accent.

The solution, in my lowly opinion, was to use her accent to her advantage. Read something southern. I was about to opine this to her, when the bell tolled for the next class to begin.

We ground out our cigarettes and returned to the class room to hear about the rash of barn burnings that had broken out in Yoknapatawpha County, the fictitious Mississippi county Faulkner had created in which to stage his mind-boggling stories. (My guess is Yoknapatawpha is Choctaw for “Land of Many Barns.”) I’d have to wait until the following Monday to give Constance my advice, should she even remember who the hell I was.

I thought about it over the weekend and reduced her options for readings to two. She could do Blanche DuBoise in “A Streetcar Named Desire”, which was written, coincidentally, by a Mississippian who had the good sense to change his name to “Tennessee”. Problem here, though, was that Blanche was a hooker, and the Miss America pageant was kind of old fashioned. The other choice was to select some propitious parts of “Gone With The Wind” where old Scarlett was giving them hell in her attempts to kick-start Tara back into operation. She was strong and determined there and not the bratty little flirt she was in the first part of the book. I determined that the latter might better weather the scrutiny of the geriatric folks who ran the pageant. So GWTW it was then.

I had the weekend to consider it, and I spent a few hours in the college library Saturday extricating propitious passages from GWTW. I assembled about three pages of Scarlett letting them have it and typed them up on an old Underwood I’d found in a trash bin behind the Biloxi City Hall. Driver, my best friend, and an excellent mechanic, had somehow injected new life into it, and I was using it for all the short stories and term papers I was required to write as an English major focusing on creative writing.

So, I had the suggested readings all ready for Constance when our Monday English classes rolled around. I'd decided not to force them upon her, but to have them ready should she choose to have another smoke with me and bring the subject up. Trust me, this was no part of a plan on my part to ingratiate myself to her. She was royalty; I was her lowliest subject. I had no delusions that our relationship would ever be anything more than a couple of smokers blowing airborne carcinogens at one another.

The Monday classes arrived, and I was at my normal perch in the hallway. When I'd exited the classroom, Constance had been talking to someone, and, for a moment, I thought she was going to be a no-show. I'd no more than thought that than she emerged. She saw me, mesmerized me once again with her smile, and walked over.

I had a cigarette ready for her. God, she was beautiful, I thought as I lit her up. She immersed me in ambrosia, which I eagerly sucked in. She thanked me and inquired as to how my weekend had been. I assured her it had indeed gone well. I then inquired about hers.

"Oh, I don't know, Ford," she fretted. "I'm just worried as hell about this Miss America crap. Oh, by the way, have you thought anymore about what I should select for my dramatic readings?"

"I have indeed," I replied, happily handing her my three typewritten pages, which I had entitled "Readings of Scarlett from GWTW for Constance."

She smiled pleasantly at my offering and quickly read through it.

"It's wonderful, Ford. Do you think I can do it?"

"Well, give it a shot. Emote, and don't be afraid to lay the southern accent

on. Our girl Scarlett was a southerner, and she spoke fluent southern.”

So, Constance began to read what I had copied down for her. She plunged herself into it, and I have to say that she did a damned good job for having seen the script, so to speak, for only the second time. The readings I selected, if you’ll pardon my immodesty, were perfect for someone with a southern accent as thick as ice-cold maple syrup.

When she’d finished she looked up at me for my verdict. “So, how’d I do.”

“If I were a casting director,” I said, and I meant it sincerely, “I would most definitely give you a call back. Excellent job for a first reading. Margaret Mitchell would be proud of you.”

Her eyes surprised me when they softened so. She reached up with a manicured hand and softly stroked my cheek. “It was so sweet of you to do this for me, Ford. I really appreciate it.”

“My pleasure, Constance.”

“Constance? Only my momma calls me that.”

“I think Constance is a beautiful name. May I call you Constance?”

She had rolled up my typed pages, and she slapped my arm playfully with them. “Only if I can call you Rutherford.”

She laughed when she saw my wounded expression. “I’m only kidding. I know you don’t like Rutherford. I’ve heard you ask Dr. Young a half-dozen times to call you Ford. After this, though,” she said, holding up the Scarlett papers, “I’d be a total ingrate if I said you couldn’t call me Constance.”



The bell sounded, and we headed back to class. “Keep practicing,” I said encouragingly. I paused for effect and added, “Constance.”

I sat a few rows behind her in class. I have no idea what Dr. Young had to say during that next hour. While he Faulknered on in Yoknapawphanese, I was counting the wisps of honey blonde hair Constance had on the back of her ballerina neck. She turned around several times and caught me ogling her. She’d give me a quick smile and then return her attention to Dr. Young, Dr. Young, Dr. Young.

It happened that despite the many abysmal short stories I’d given him over my three and a half years at USM, I owed him yet another. I was getting ready to bang out some more pulpy fiction when, for some reason, I thought about Jesse, a friend of mine who had, literally, taught me to keep my eye on the ball. It was a short-lived friendship, as Jesse was a black kid, and the Biloxi police had seen fit to physically discourage our friendship. I’d lost track of him since I’d been at college.

Anyway, I decided to write about how I, a born and thoroughly brainwashed Mississippian, had come to Jesus with respect to racism. I’d been told many times by various professors who’d read my writings that I should confine myself to writing about things I knew something about. I ignored that advice and mostly wrote stories that would’ve made Walter Mitty sue me for plagiarism. I was invariably the hero and, inasmuch as I was omniscient and could decide who got what, I always saw to it that I, the hero, got what I wanted. I had some diminutive writing skills, but I was totally lacking in discipline, plotting, and organization. Down deep, I knew I was just jerking off and would, at best, wind up teaching English at my old alma mater, Biloxi High School.

As I started to write about Jesse and tell about how the cops had beat him up for doing not much more than walking down the street with me and how he could no longer be my friend and had to start calling me Mister, the words came flooding out. It was once again a story about me, but not how great I was, but how stupid and uncaring I'd been. Although it was me I was writing about, I called my self "Wade" and wrote about how I'd had an epiphany with respect to racism, belatedly realizing how unfair and cruel it was. I titled the story "The Epiphany."

I took it to Dr. Young, who, after he'd read it, called me in for a critique.

"Well, Rutherford," he said disapprovingly, "I hadn't realized that in addition to your many other faults that you were also a nigger lover."

That absolutely floored me. Okay, I didn't exactly expect him to be MLK, Jr., but I'd pretty much equated racism with stupidity, and the more educated a person was, or so I'd naively concluded, the less likely he was to be prejudice. Stupid me. Anyway, I'd already incurred his wrath enough. Why suffer a strike three? So, I let his comment go unchallenged.

It was my last semester in college, and I found myself looking forward to my afternoon English classes with Dr. Young, certainly not because of him, but because I'd have a chance to see Constance. Sometimes, in the few minutes before class would begin, she'd actually walk back to my desk and talk to me, but it was mostly during the 10-minute breaks between classes that we'd converse. During one of our smoke and greets, she asked me what fraternity I was a member of. I told her I was unaffiliated.

"Their loss," she comforted.

On another occasion she mentioned that her daddy, who happened to be a very rich daddy, had given her a new T-Bird for her 18th birthday, the car that in the 1950's people would kill for. "What kind of car do you drive, Ford? A Ford?" She teased.

I glumly pointed to my shoes.

"Well," she said, almost apologetically, "There's no place to park anyway."

Eventually, as the months passed towards graduation, I told her my whole white trash story, how I wouldn't even be in college were it not for my basketball scholarship, how my mother had died during my freshman year, and how I spent my summers slaving away in my uncle's printing shop. Slaving away was an exaggeration, as my uncle loved to bet the ponies, as he called them, and a good deal of my time was spent carrying bets for him to Jake, the local bookie.

She reached up again with those manicured fingers and stroked my peasant face. "You're the nicest boy I know, Ford, and someday you'll have everything you want."

Interesting theory, I said to myself. And I knew also that, despite the many danger signs posted all around her, I had ignored them all and done exactly what I knew from the start I shouldn't have done. I wanted her.

That soon became academic, as the story I'd written about Jesse jolted my simple-ass back from Never-Never Land to reality. Dr. Young asked me to stop by his office. I speculated about why he wanted to talk to me, of all people, about. My talks with Constance had calmed me down, and I no longer went out of my way to incur his wrath, whatever that is. John

Steinbeck didn't know. He thought it was grapes.

"Well, Rutherford," he said almost disappointedly, "I suppose congratulations are in order."

If I looked clueless, it was because I was, well, clueless.

He clued me in. "One of your short stories won the Faulkner Award."

"Faulkner. I hate Faulkner," I blurted before my brain could intercede.

Dr. Young gave me a pained look. "I'm sure Mr. Faulkner will be distressed to learn that someone of your esteem does not approve of him. Be that as it may, USM submitted 10 short stories for the Faulkner competition, one of which was yours. Ole Miss and State, as well as every other college in Mississippi, also submitted entries. The judges, for reasons which will forever baffle me, decided to award your story first prize."

As I said before, the English department had a number of my stories on file, so I was curious as to which one had won. "Which story was it?" I asked. "I bet it was the one about the girl and the football player who---"

He bade me be silent. "Do you mean that atrocious story you ended with 'That was when she realized that the dragons had devoured all the fairy princes at least a thousand years ago'?"

"Yes, sir. That one?"

"Good God, no!" He exclaimed. "It was your story about the nigger, Jesse. If you own a coat and tie, please wear it and be in Dr. Newcastle's office tomorrow afternoon at two. He'll present you with a plaque and a check for

\$250. Your story will also be published in the school newspaper.”

“Do I have any say-so in whether or not it’s printed in the school paper?”

He perceived my dilemma, and I detected a slight smile. “No, you do not.”

Here was my dilemma. A short story daring to suggest that Mississippi’s treatment of blacks was wrong and ignorant and printed in the University of Southern Mississippi school newspaper? The students would lynch me.

When next I met with Constance, she immediately sensed something was amiss. Her lovely browns showed genuine concern. “What’s wrong, Ford? Tell me. We’re friends, aren’t we? You can tell me.”

Perhaps if she hadn’t used the word “friends” I might’ve told her the cause of my anguish. The school newspaper was coming out the next day, though, and she’d know soon enough I was guilty of that most grievous of sins in Mississippi, nigger-loving.

“It’s really nothing,” I lied.

“Tell me,” she ordered, her impatience beginning to show.

“Well, I won a short story writing contest. I got a plaque and a check for \$250.”

Her look of concern disappeared, and her face brightened. “Oh, that’s wonderful, Ford. And here I was thinking something terrible happened.”

“It’ll be in the school newspaper Friday,” I said glumly, “together with a picture of Dr. Newcastle presenting the award to me,”

“Oh, I can’t wait to read it, Ford. And I want you to autograph your picture for me.” She seemed very excited and pleased for me. I had a strong suspicion she might be of a different temperament when next I saw her.

Although I was concerned about her good will towards me diminishing, I was more concerned about staying alive for the next week or so. So, being the accomplished liar I am, I began to tell everyone who would listen that Dr. Young had required me to write the story and had even gone so far as to outline exactly what he wanted me to say. He said that this would teach me discipline as a writer, a quality I severely lacked. Every student was required to take freshman and sophomore English and Lit, and every student had been exposed to the slings and arrows of Dr. Young, Dr. Young, Dr. Young.

To my amazement, considering how unbelievable my concocted story was, the ruse worked. Most of the students bought into it. It helped that I had the support of my basketball team mates, and they graciously convinced the football players that I was just a dupe who lacked the balls to stand up to a duplicitous English professor. I also had the school newspaper on my side, as the journalism professor overseeing the paper, was a carpetbagger from Massachusetts, whose singular goal in life was to drag her Confederate-gray clad students into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She’d been the one who coerced Dr. Newcastle into permitting the story to be published in the school newspaper. So, although my story pissed off the entire student body, there were a lot of other people to blame in addition to yours truly.

But, as George Bernard Shaw wrote, “I had no enemies, but all my friends hated me.” That was especially true of Constance. After my story was published, our “relationship” ceased. Her large browns now viewed me with scorn and contempt. She wouldn’t even speak to me, much less join me for a smoke.

Three weeks went by. The furor over my story had subsided. Who knows, I thought, perhaps there was hope for Mississippi. I still couldn't believe that a panel of Mississippi judges had the balls to give the Faulkner Award to someone who wrote a story critical of the state's separate but equal fascism. Constance? What can I say? The bad news was that I was crushed and heart-broken. The good news was that I was crushed and heart-broken but still alive.

I was having a smoke and feeling immensely sorry for myself when all of a sudden she emerged from the class room and walked over to me.

I thought she was an apparition. "Constance?" I practically gasped.

Her large browns were now bereft of scorn and contempt. They were almost back to normal. "May I have a cigarette, please, Ford, or have you given them all to some other girl?"

I hastily shook out a cigarette for her, then nervously lit it. She blew some ambrosia my way, which I quickly engulfed. "Of course not, Constance. I'm just happy you're talking to me again."

"When I read your story, I swore I would never speak to you again. How could he write something like that, I wondered? He's nothing but a---"

"Nigger lover?"

"Don't use that word," she commanded. "I know you don't mean it. But yes, that's exactly what I was thinking. I was literally screaming at you. I could hardly believe it. I read your story again the next night, and it wasn't quite as bad. And then, almost by sheer force of habit, I read it again every night.

Each time I read your story my anger towards you seemed to subside a little. I read it again last night, and I started to cry. Just like Wade, I'd finally gotten it. I have everything, and the blacks have nothing. And it's all because of us greedy damned whites. We still treat them like slaves. I'm so ashamed."

So, she'd had an epiphany of her own. We resumed our smoke sessions, but I could sense something was still bothering her. One day she came out and took my hand. "Let's cut class," she requested. "I have to talk to you."

She led me down to the courtyard, where she found a secluded bench. She still had hold of my hand, and she was about as close to me as she could get, all of which pleased me immensely. I suspected she was about one stage away from crying. It was her nickel, so I waited for her to speak.

"That was you in your story, wasn't it? Wade was you, right?"

"Yes."

"And Jesse was real?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. There was something about Wade that reminded me of you." She paused, as if she was reluctant to proceed. "Ford," she eventually said, "if I ask you a question, will you answer it honestly?"

"Yes," I lied.

"Are you in love with me?"



Didn't have to lie on that one. "Yes," I admitted.

"Why haven't you asked me out then?"

"You mean like out on a date?"

"Yes."

"I figured you'd say no."

"I would have, but not for the reasons you think."

"Why then?"

"I have a game plan for my life, Ford. I want to be an actress. I've dreamed of it since I was nine years old. I'm going to do my best at the Miss America Pageant in September, and, hopefully, if I can do well, I'll use it as a stepping stone to make a go of it in acting. That's my plan."

"How does that affect my having a date with you?"

She cupped my hand in hers, and, to my astonishment, actually kissed it. "Don't you get it, Ford? I'm in love with you, too. All I think about is you. I can't wait for our smoke sessions. I want to be with you, but I'm afraid that if we saw each other I wouldn't be able to do what I've dreamed of doing all my life."

She put her head on my shoulder and began to cry. I put my arm around her and held her close. Finally, I told her I understood. I was just extra baggage she couldn't carry on her bumpy ride to Hollywood.

We decided it would be best if we cut the cord then and there. It was tough for me, and possibly even tougher for her. She had a choice. I didn't.

Graduation came around, and I picked up my diploma. No one said much to me, although I did hear the words "nigger-lover" muttered a few times.

As someone once wrote, "It is the shepherd's lot to fall in love with an unattainable woman."

THE END, THE END, THE END.